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What's in a Name?

Beyond Rescue As We Know It

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Operational art is “the application of creative imagination . . . to design strategies, campaigns, and major operations and organize and employ military forces.”¹ The visual arts epitomize creativity while challenging viewers to interpret an artist's message. In some instances, the artist's intent is quite clear, as in Paul Gauguin's painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, which contemplates humankind's existence and evolution in terms of birth, life, and death.² Examining other subjects in a similar manner may also prove worthwhile. By applying Gauguin's three questions to the Air Force's personnel recovery (PR) mission, we can design a road map for the future.

Throughout the evolution of Air Force rescue, one recurring theme—the redesignation of forces—has more or less coincided with changes in capabilities and increases or decreases in the scope of the mission. The latest and perhaps most substantial change to affect Air Force rescue in the last several decades is the June 2009 adoption of PR as one of the service's core functions.³ By doing so, the Air Force elevated the importance of the mission by formally assuming ownership and committing to this capability on a par with air superiority, rapid global mobility, special operations, and other functions. As the only service to have PR as a core function, the Air Force is recognized as the Department of Defense's (DOD) expert in this mission. But this increased focus calls for another name change—one long overdue. Specifically, such a seemingly minor initiative as redesi-

gnating “rescue squadrons” as “personnel recovery squadrons” can become a catalyst that energizes further changes. More than just a new name and flight-suit patch, the concept of a PR squadron will define how the Air Force organizes, trains, and equips PR forces to operate in the joint environment while professionally developing those personnel to perform duties beyond the tactical level in order to lead the rescue mission into the future.

Where Do We Come From?

To find out where we come from, we must study our history. Inception of the modern rescue force occurred on 13 March 1946 with the establishment of the Air Rescue Service (ARS), led by Col Richard Kight, under Air Transport Command.⁴ Colonel Kight (later a brigadier general) was responsible for coining the “Code of an Air Rescue Man,” which ends with the well-known oath “These things [we] do that others may live.”⁵ Following the Korean War, the ARS reverted to a conventional peacetime civil search and rescue (SAR) mission.⁶ According to one historian, “Most USAF leaders believed that the Korean experience had been an aberration in warfare, and they expected that few lessons were to be learned.” This attitude led to cuts in ARS's budget and personnel, which resulted in the loss of rotary-wing doctrine and expertise.⁷ When the need once again arose for combat search and rescue (CSAR) during the Vietnam War, the Air Force assembled forces and renamed the

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE 2011		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE What's in a Name? Beyond Rescue As We Know It				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) Air Force Research Institute (AFRI), Air & Space Power Journal, 155 N. Twining Street, Maxwell AFB, AL, 36112				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 8	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

ARS the Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service (ARRS) in January 1966. However, by then, those forces had to relearn many of the lessons of Korea, so the failed early years of the Vietnam conflict became known as the “dark age of SAR.”⁸ Nevertheless, Air Force rescue later gained fame in Vietnam for daring missions involving “Jolly Green Giant” helicopters that plucked downed Air Force and other services’ aircrews out of the dense jungle. Airmen such as A1C William Pitsenbarger, a pararescueman and recipient of the Medal of Honor, gave their lives to save others. Thus, the latter portion of the Vietnam War became known as the “golden age” of rescue.⁹

Unfortunately, Air Force rescue atrophied again after Vietnam, and the subsequent 15 years saw a loss of combat rescue capability. In the 1980s, Twenty-Third Air Force owned the mission for a time, under United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), which later divested responsibility to Military Airlift Command, which then revived the original designation, Air Rescue Service.¹⁰

The beginning of Operation Desert Storm brought about the hasty reassembling of CSAR forces and operational command and control (C2) architecture. As Darrel Whitcomb observes, “In the summer of 1990, CSAR in toto was not in the best of shape,” due largely to “force reductions, budget decisions, and reorganizations.”¹¹ Additionally, the transfer of HC-130 and MH-53 aircraft and experienced personnel from the ARS to USSOCOM resulted in the tasking of Special Operations Command Central, rather than ARS, with the CSAR mission in Desert Storm. However, instead of the special operations component, the joint rescue coordination center—an entity that belonged to the conventional air component of Central Command Air Forces—was assigned the C2 responsibility. This divided architecture meant that Special Operations Command Central owned the primary recovery mission for all service components while Central Command Air Forces, which had no helicopters in-theater, exercised C2 for that

mission.¹² Such a problematic command relationship between components produced a significant lesson learned from the conflict.

Apart from those in Desert Storm, other recovery missions in the 1990s famously included the rescue of Capt Scott O’Grady by a Marine Corps tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel team and the recoveries, by Air Force special operations forces, of an F-117 and an F-16 pilot during Operation Allied Force. Meanwhile, conventional Air Force rescue units struggled to find their identity. On 1 February 1993, Air Mobility Command (the successor to Military Airlift Command) transferred the ARS to Air Combat Command, which in turn disbanded it and aligned some rescue units with their geographic major commands (e.g., US Air Forces in Europe and Pacific Air Forces).¹³ At the same time, Air Force CSAR squadrons, known as “air rescue squadrons,” became “rescue squadrons.” Although Air Force Special Operations Command absorbed rescue units in 2003 and Air Combat Command reinherited the mission in 2006, no significant shift occurred in the organizing, training, or equipping of these units.

Prior to Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, traditional Air Force CSAR forces sat alert in Turkey and Kuwait for Operations Northern and Southern Watch, respectively, waiting for the distress call that never came, much as they had during Desert Storm. Today, Air Force rescue forces are certainly engaged in combat and heroically going into harm’s way to save lives, but the service’s PR mission is currently stagnating from the combination of high operating tempo (OPTEMPO) and difficulty adapting to change.

What Are We?

In the 1990s, the DOD adopted the term *personnel recovery*, defined as “the sum of military, diplomatic, and civil efforts to prepare for and execute the recovery and reintegration of isolated personnel.”¹⁴ The Joint Personnel Recovery Agency was es-



tablished within US Joint Forces Command in 1999 as the DOD's office of primary responsibility for PR.¹⁵ Although CSAR is only a subset of PR, most people are more familiar with the former, the means by which "the Air Force accomplishes the PR recovery task. It is the Air Force's preferred mechanism for personnel recovery in uncertain or hostile environments and denied areas."¹⁶

The term *search* in CSAR is an antiquated misnomer that brings to mind aircraft flying in hostile airspace "searching" for a downed Airman or other isolated personnel. In reality, the "locate" task of PR now usually happens at the operational, not tactical, level. The air and space operations center, joint PR center, or component PR coordination cell utilizes the gamut of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets; satellites in the Global Positioning System; and survival radios, such as the Combat Survivor Evader Locator, to take the "search" out of search and rescue before recovery forces ever launch.¹⁷ Understanding the operational-level capabilities and responsibilities of PR C2 is essential for professional development, which will create future PR leaders who practice operational art. However, among the Air Force "PR triad" of HH-60, HC-130, and Guardian Angel weapon systems, only the Guardian Angel community is broadly educated on all phases of the PR mission, from reporting through reintegration of recovered personnel.¹⁸

The Air Force trains our PR triad to be tactical experts in recovery—no small feat since newly assigned personnel can take up to two years to progress from initial skills training to fully mission qualified status. The Air Force needs to realize a return on its training investment by deploying and employing our PR forces in combat, but PR units have become victims of their own success. Without a doubt, Air Force PR represents the most highly trained and proficient tactical rescue force in the world. Our PR forces are invaluable to the joint team because no other service possesses the same capability.¹⁹ Recovery of personnel by Airmen is as old as military aviation itself, but

the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have shown that the old paradigm of CSAR's saving a fighter pilot from enemy territory amounts to only a fraction of what PR forces are tasked to do. The vast majority of isolated personnel are ground-component members—US and coalition—needing extraction from the fight. The Air Force performs this mission immensely well. HH-60 crews and Guardian Angels in particular have saved thousands of lives by flying in bad weather, at night, and under hostile fire to evacuate and provide immediate medical care to wounded soldiers and civilians. In 2009 alone, Air Force crews were credited with a combined 768 saves and 3,594 assists in Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.²⁰

This persistent need for Air Force combat capability in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere has resulted in a low-supply, high-demand PR force that spends an average of one day deployed for every day spent at home station, a ratio known as a "1:1 dwell." Even though this high OPTEMPO gives PR personnel extensive tactical experience, it deprives them of the chance to acquire additional PR skills and greater operational experience—or to pursue other career-development opportunities. As the 1980s and 1990s generation of senior leaders retires from active service, combat veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq will require more than tactical skills to lead and prepare Air Force and joint PR forces in future operations. They should also have background in PR C2 and should serve in DOD, joint, or combatant command staffs to gain operational background and strategic acumen.

Among the officer corps, are we merely individual combat rescue officers or HC-130 and HH-60 pilots? Or should we instead be known as PR officers? Currently, the Air Force specialty codes (AFSC) for an HC-130 pilot and navigator are 11R and 12R, respectively, which groups them with reconnaissance, surveillance, and electronic warfare aviators, while HH-60 pilots (AFSC 11H) are aligned with other helicopter pilots. Along with combat rescue officers, PR is the proper specialty of HC-130 and HH-60 offi-

cers, just as fighter or mobility crew members are categorized into those respective mission areas. PR officers should hold the AFSCs 11P, 12P, and 13P (replacing the 13D control-and-recovery designation currently held by combat rescue officers). These AFSCs would more accurately define and identify the PR specialty and its associated knowledge, placing more emphasis on the core function than on individual weapon systems. Similarly, the Air Force created a new 18X AFSC in October 2009 for operators of remotely piloted aircraft in order to recognize, capture, and develop the unique skills in that community.²¹

By adopting PR AFSCs, the Air Force would do a better job of capturing, developing, and retaining PR expertise. We would thereby increase the pool of officers available to fill positions on higher headquarters staffs or in deployed joint PR centers and PR coordination cells. PR officers working in joint operational and strategic environments would tell (and sell) the Air Force's PR story. By increasing the number of operational and staff positions in combatant commands worldwide, we also would enhance opportunities to educate partner nations on PR, thus building their capacities and helping them establish organic PR capabilities.

The 23rd Wing, parent unit of all of the Air Force's active duty PR forces, already engages in limited activities at the tactical level that "build partnerships," another of the service's 12 core functions.²² PR Airmen recently advised Colombian forces on air-drops and infiltration/exfiltration operations.²³ These types of efforts in theater security cooperation, however, are constrained by the limited availability of Air Force PR experts, who are heavily tasked to support wartime commitments. We need to find a way to simultaneously decrease the OPTEMPO of our deployments but increase our role in theater security cooperation since experiences in building partner capacity undoubtedly contribute to preparing well-rounded Airmen to lead PR squadrons.

Without broadly developing our people as well as our operational and strategic

competency, Air Force PR, despite its unmatched capability and success in recovery operations, risks losing relevancy in the joint environment. In a meeting with the Defense Writers Group, held shortly before termination of the CSAR-X helicopter-replacement program, John Young—former undersecretary of defense for acquisition, technology, and logistics—opined, "I don't know that that [CSAR] community has to have its own set of assets for the occasional rescue mission. We have new things coming on line like V-22s and other things that can be pressed into service. When we do our rescue mission we're going to do a come-as-you-are operation anyway, unless all the CSAR assets are pre-positioned for that."²⁴ Apart from demonstrating a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of PR in today's fight and a disregard for the risks of ad hoc recovery by untrained or unprepared assets, the undersecretary's statement suggests that Air Force PR is narrowly focused and its capability easily duplicated. PR forces, like special operations forces, cannot be mass produced; however, Air Force PR does indeed have a narrow focus. In reality, the joint train has left the station, and Air Force PR needs to get on board. PR officers on staff have a duty to advocate the mission and educate our senior leaders on PR issues ranging from plans and operations to acquisition, requirements, strategy, policy, and doctrine.

Where Are We Going?

CSAR-X, the Air Force's planned rescue-helicopter replacement program, appeared to embody the future of combat rescue until the secretary of defense cancelled it, asking whether PR "can only be accomplished by yet another single-service solution."²⁵ Because current operations and the "long war" necessitate meeting the urgent equipment needs of war fighters, the Air Force has put a high priority on acquiring new recovery aircraft. Despite the CSAR-X cancellation, an HH-60 operational-loss-replacement plan



exists to compensate for 20-plus years of aircraft losses during combat and training. In addition, the Air Force has begun recapitalizing our legacy HC-130 fleet with the HC-130J model.²⁶ But we must still address the long-term definition of joint PR. New technology and iron on the ramp will mollify frustrations associated with aging equipment and increase our ability to survive and operate against increasingly capable enemy air defense threats. Nevertheless, new aircraft and associated tactics, techniques, and procedures will be far less useful without smart personnel who understand strategy and desired effects. DOD leadership has already recognized that we need to adapt. Meeting joint expectations requires widening the scope of the Air Force's traditional thinking with regard to rescue.

our core professional military education in PR, actively increasing the Air Force's PR participation in collateral missions and exercises, widely exchanging PR specialists among members of the joint community, and incorporating PR into the AirSea Battle operational concept.

Within the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency, the Personnel Recovery Education and Training Center exists "to educate DoD and selected other national and international Personnel Recovery professionals, both civilian and military, in the art and science of planning and executing joint Personnel Recovery operations."²⁷ The center's courses train and educate joint officers and enlisted members but primarily instruct combat rescue officers or a select few operational staffers, not only on the recovery

New technology and iron on the ramp will mollify frustrations associated with aging equipment and increase our ability to survive and operate against increasingly capable enemy air defense threats. Nevertheless, new aircraft and associated tactics, techniques, and procedures will be far less useful without smart personnel who understand strategy and desired effects.

Senior leaders such as Mr. Young will continue to take the Air Force's CSAR competency for granted, and our tactical units will continue their 1:1 dwell ratio because other nations, services, or components are unable or unwilling to dedicate assets to recover their own personnel. For those reasons, we should consider several initiatives to train others while advancing our own PR forces. These initiatives include expanding

phase of PR but also on the other PR execution tasks of reporting, locating, supporting, and reintegrating. Courses offered include PR Plans and Operations as well as Reintegration Team Responsibilities.²⁸ Unfortunately, training slots for these valuable courses are extremely limited.

On 9 August 2010, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced his intent to eliminate Joint Forces Command. Naturally, we

must consider the cascading effects, including what will become of the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency. With or without that agency, the Personnel Recovery Education and Training Center could expand to become a “PR University” that would incorporate compulsory and optional classes as part of either mission qualification or career field upgrades.²⁹ Additionally, the center would be an ideal forum for classes on rescue history and case studies that would help build a foundation for new PR officers. PR University’s cadre would include experienced PR officers and specialists from all the services.

An article entitled “A Rescue Force for the World: Adapting Airpower to the Realities of the Long War” coherently maps the future role of Air Force PR.³⁰ Specifically, it proposes that we extensively employ Air Force rescue assets for disaster response and theater security cooperation, in large part to engage other nations and win the hearts and minds of their citizenry. Along those same lines, PR squadrons, through greater participation in collateral missions and exercises, could broaden their Airmen, develop their future leaders, and increase credibility and relevancy in the joint and interagency arena. Counterdrug operations with the Department of Homeland Security, noncombatant evacuation exercises with the Marine Corps, and humanitarian relief with the US Agency for International Development represent just a few examples of activities for which Air Force PR experts are ideally suited to contribute. Exercise Angel Thunder, the “premier personnel recovery exercise in the world,” held annually in the Arizona desert, serves as an excellent example to emulate and expand upon.³¹ We should also incorporate PR scenarios into all Red Flag and Green Flag exercises since joint and coalition partners regularly attend them.

According to joint doctrine, PR can and should involve air, land, or naval forces—whatever is necessary to fulfill the mission.³² Exchange tours offer an ideal way to increase participants’ knowledge of the capabilities of sister services and components as

well as enhance joint integration. Air Force HH-60 crews, for example, would embed with Marines to exercise tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel or in Navy SAR units to gain proficiency in shipboard operations and C2, eventually returning to Air Force units to share their experiences. Obviously, this is not a new idea, but we should break down the old construct that exchange tours must be few and far between. Rather than special duties, these assignments should become a normal part of career progression. Increasing exchange opportunities would also allow our sister services to learn from the best—Air Force PR experts. Our service still possesses the preponderance of PR forces and expertise; consequently, the Air Force PR coordination cell is normally designated the joint PR center as well.³³ No other service has as many dedicated recovery assets, including aircraft; officer and enlisted aircrews; pararescuemen; and survival, evasion, resistance, and escape instructors. Our PR officers and specialists will serve as enablers who can train, educate, and increase the capacity of our sister services to fulfill the inherent doctrinal responsibility of recovering their own personnel, thereby reducing the OPTEMPO of stressed Air Force PR forces.

The AirSea Battle concept, initiated in September 2009 by the chief of staff of the Air Force and the chief of naval operations, offers a perfect forum for joint discussion of PR. Thus far, the concept has emphasized major combat operations in antiaccess environments.³⁴ Although this type of conflict seems to set up a “classic” downed-aviator CSAR scenario, regardless of the nature of the mission, the current AirSea Battle concept makes no mention of PR as a critical collaboration between air and naval forces. It would almost certainly become the Air Force’s responsibility to recover naval aviators located beyond the range of Navy rescue forces, so we should not overlook this strategic opportunity to enhance Air Force–Navy integration. Further advancement of AirSea Battle should include discussion of



shared PR doctrine; training; C2; and tactics, techniques, and procedures.

Conclusion

We have never had a better opportunity to advance the future of joint PR. Specifically, we should leverage the increased focus on the mission, brought about by the designation of PR as an Air Force core function, by further expanding our role. Organizing, training, equipping, and committing to *personnel recovery*—not just the CSAR skill set—will define the future relevancy of Air Force PR forces. Along with expanding the role of AirSea Battle, the other initiatives will lead to a more capable joint PR community. Today, however, we find ourselves in a protracted high OPTEMPO that stretches our people and equipment to their limits. The better the Air Force performs our tactical recovery mission, the more likely it is that the DOD will continue to depend on us to provide that combat capability for all services and components. By maintaining the status quo, the Air Force risks creating only tactical experts without

the requisite operational know-how and strategic vision to lead PR in the current and future joint environment.

Remembering where we came from, we must build on the contributions, lessons learned (both good and bad), and legacy of Airmen who came before us. To take the next evolutionary step, we should redesignate Air Force rescue units as PR squadrons, led by PR officers whose professional development makes them experienced not only in tactical and operational warfare but also in strategic thinking. These PR squadrons should integrate exchange personnel from sister services and participate in a wide range of joint and interagency missions. Of course, by increasing our depth and taking on additional collateral missions, we risk becoming the proverbial jack-of-all-trades and master of none. Balancing tactical expertise and combat commitments with this expanded definition of Air Force PR will prove challenging, but by continually applying operational art and creative imagination to this dynamic mission, we will take it beyond rescue as we know it. ✪

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29. Education and training is hardly a new idea. JP 3-50, *Personnel Recovery*, 5 January 2007, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp3_50.pdf, devotes several pages to this topic, but I argue that we currently don’t do it. We need to expand the capacity, increase throughput, and increase emphasis on education and training beyond the tactical level.
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